

Second-in-Command

by Ckelst

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Summary: Stoick wants Hiccup to choose a second-in-command for the Dragon Training Academy. How can he make a wise, fair choice among his own friends, without making everyone mad at him? Let's just say, he doesn't do it the way Stoick would have done it. Rated K-plus, just to be safe; the language is all K.

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A/N This story was inspired by an episode of Gilligan's Island, in which Gilligan is compelled to judge a beauty contest among the three ladies on the island, and deal with the pressure from the three other men to pick their favorite lady. I get my ideas from the strangest places...

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"You're acting like this is punishment. Think of it as training for future leadership." Stoick was being firm, but still friendly, so Hiccup didn't want to push the issue too hard. Still, he had questions.

"Why do I need to pick a second-in-command, Dad? There are only six of us in the whole Academy."

"Every leader needs someone behind him," the chief said, as though quoting from a Viking management textbook. "Take Spitelout, for example. He's the perfect second-in-command for me."

"Okay, Dad. But... what does he do?"

"Just about nothing. That's the way I like it; this village isn't big enough for two men trying to call the shots at the same time. But if anything ever happened to me, he's ready to step in and take over."

You need that kind of back-up, now that you're in charge of the Dragon Training Academy. Someday, you'll be the chief of this village, and you'll have to know how to delegate authority. This will be good training for you, son."

"Okay, Dad. I'll look into it." Hiccup walked away from the discussion with a vaguely bad feeling about the whole thing.

There were six people in the Academy. He was the leader by popular acclaim, but he knew that a couple of the others would gladly be in charge if they could. He also knew that, if those aspirants got control of the Academy, they would quickly make a huge mess of things. Their orders would be nonsensical and contradictory; the others wouldn't willingly follow them; the town would quickly lose confidence in their dragon riders; Stoick would probably have to disband the Academy within a month to save the village.

One reason for his success as a leader was that he stood in the middle of everyone. Snotlout couldn't try to become too dominant without making Tuffnut feel like he had to push back, and vice-versa, so his own neutral presence kept the two of them in balance. Fishlegs' desire to learn everything worth learning sometimes collided with Astrid's desire to just get the job done with the tools at hand; there again, he kept them in balance. Ruff was the wild card; she'd take anyone's side as long as it looked either fun or painful. Hiccup couldn't imagine any of them leading this wildly diverse crew and making it work.

Still, the village chief had given him a thinly-veiled order, and it would be best not to disobey. He brought it up at the next Academy meeting.

"My dad says the Academy needs a second-in-command, so somebody can take over if something happens to me."

"Cool," Tuffnut decided. "You're picking me for the job, of course."

"Actually, I hadn't decided. I haven't figured out what makes a good second-in-command yet."

"That's easy," Snotlout said. "It takes big arm muscles, an awesome helmet, and a take-no-prisoners attitude." He went into some kind of dance, chanting, "Snot-lout, Snot-lout, oi oi oi!"

"You know, that could qualify me for the job, except for the attitude," Fishlegs thought out loud. "And the helmet. And the dance; definitely not the dance."

"Well, here's how we're going to do it," Hiccup announced. "Each of you can try to convince me. Some time today, show me why you'll be the best second-in-command. I'll narrow it down and make a decision tomorrow." How's that for leadership, Dad? he thought. I have decisively decided to put off deciding.

Fishlegs was the first to form a plan of action. He waved Hiccup over to his table in the Mead Hall. "I'm writing a new book," he said. "It's going to be dedicated..." His voice dropped to those quiet tones he usually reserved for private moments with Meatlug. "...Dedicated to my best friend, the most awesome dragon trainer, our

fearless leader, best friend forever... Hiccup."

"Thanks, Legs. That's kind of touching," Hiccup smiled. "What's the book going to be about?"

"Well, I haven't worked all those details out yet, but I think I've got the dedication page down." Hiccup shook his head and left the Hall.

"Hey, Hiccup! Look up here!" Ruff's voice was unmistakeable. She and her twin brother had been riding their two-headed dragon in circles, waiting for him to leave the Hall. "Being a second-in-command means you give orders, right? Watch this!" She turned to her brother. "Fly upside down!"

"No, you fly upside down!" he shot back. "I'm way better at giving orders than you!" Barf and Belch rotated their heads inward so both riders would be upside down, but that caused the twins to knock their helmets together, very hard.

"Wow," sighed a dazed Tuff. "You can be second-in-command. I want these pretty colors!"

"No, I want them!" They banged helmets again. Hiccup kept walking.

Soon, he met Snotlout, who was sitting on a stone wall, grinning. "Hey, Lout! What's your plan to impress me?"

"Nothing!" he answered.

"Nothing?" Hiccup repeated. "That's not like you. Are you feeling okay?"

"I heard my dad say he's the perfect second-in-command because he doesn't do anything," Snotlout explained. "So if I don't do anything, that will make me the perfect second-in-command for the Academy, right?" He folded his hands and sat back... and fell backwards off the wall with a cry. Hiccup kept walking.

Eventually, he ran out of village and stopped at the edge of the cliffs. To most of the people who lived in Berk, these cliffs marked the edge of their lives. To him, they were just an arbitrary line between the crowded part of his world and the uncrowded part. When he and Toothless took to the air, his life had no edges. He stood and stared out to sea.

Astrid joined him there after a few minutes. She began to say something, but he cut her off.

"Astrid, don't say anything! Don't do anything! And don't do nothing, either!"

"O-o-o-kay," she answered slowly. "Either you've completely and totally lost it, or everybody is pressuring you about that second-in-command thing."

"How am I supposed to make a choice like that? No matter who I pick, I'll wind up with four friends who resent the winner and are mad at me."

"You've solved tougher problems than this, Hiccup."

"Maybe, but I always did it with a lot of help from my friends. Now, my friends are in the middle of it, pulling me in four different directions, probably soon to be five." He gazed out at the ocean, then looked back sharply at Astrid. "If you were in charge, and you had to pick a second-in-command, how would you decide?"

"Well... I'd pick someone who thought a lot like me, but not exactly the same, so he'd keep me on my toes. I'd want someone I work well with, and I'd want someone I could trust."

He smiled slowly. "Thanks, Astrid. You've told me everything I need to know." He jogged back up the hill toward his house, his metal leg squeaking with each step.

"Okay," she said to his retreating back. "Uhh... what did I tell you?"

As the teens arrived in the Academy for next morning's meeting, they found Hiccup already there, with Toothless napping off to one side. As each teen entered, Hiccup gave him or her a folded sheet of paper. "You can look at your own papers, but don't show the others," he told them. Astrid glanced at hers; it had only the number 5 written on it.

"Okay," he began. "You've all done a lot to try and convince me who my second-in-command should be. I've done a lot of thinking. I assigned each of you a number, and I thought about all the good things about each of you that would make you a good second. I checked every one of your numbers, and there's one clear winner." He paused for effect. "Congratulations to my new second-in-command... _number six!_"

They all looked at their numbers. They looked at each other blankly. Nobody reacted.

"Hiccup, if we don't count you, there are only five of us," Astrid said.

Hiccup grinned that infuriating grin of his. "Toothless?" The dragon heard his name and raised his head, revealing the number-6 sign that Hiccup had tied around his neck.

The Academy erupted in protests.

"You picked a _dragon_ over _me?_"

>"How come you gave my sister Number 1 and I'm only Number 2?"
"How can _he_ be your second-in-command? He can't even talk!"

>"I am not convinced that this is what your father had in mind."

In the middle of this bedlam, Astrid began to giggle. She tried to hide it, which only made it worse, and soon she was laughing out loud.

"Excuse me, Laughing Girl, but you lost too," Snotlout complained.

"Yeah, losing isn't _that_ funny," Tuff added.

"It's okay; I'm in good company," she giggled. They weren't sure what she meant by that.

"This meeting is dismissed," Hiccup called over the tumult. "We're not going to get anything done anyway." Lout, Legs, and the twins filed out of the arena, angrily comparing notes and making their cases for why they should have been chosen.

Astrid stayed behind, still grinning from ear to ear. "I love the way you think sometimes," she said.

Hiccup grinned back. "If Dad asks, I'll tell him my second-in-command is the strongest, healthiest member of the entire Academy. He'll probably have something else on his mind by then, so that will satisfy him, and this whole thing will blow over."

"Seriously," she went on, "who's your _real_ choice?"

"How can you ask a guy to choose among his own friends?" he answered. "It's not fair to put me in that position. My dad had a whole village full of warriors to select from; it's not the same thing at all.

"And now, if you don't mind, my second-in-command and I are going flying. Want to fly, Toothless?" _That_ was a silly question.

As they rose up on the thermals, Hiccup called down to Astrid, "Can you keep an eye on things for me until we get back?"

"Oh, sure, dump your work load on _me!_" she shouted back. "That should be handled by your sec..."

She stopped in her tracks. _He never __did__ say who he had chosen, she thought. _Someone he works well with, someone he trusts..._

She shrugged. It's not like she _wanted_ the job; she hadn't even tried to convince him. But she still loved the way he thought, sometimes.

THE END

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